

National Family Caregiver Support Program Resources

Be Wise...Immunize!

A message for families and caregivers



Introduction

If you provide care at home for a chronically ill or disabled friend or relative, you're often "on-call" 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Sometimes the prolonged stress and physical demands can strain even the most capable person. You want to provide the best possible care, but in the process you can pay a high price by neglecting your own physical and emotional health. In fact, caring for yourself is one of the most overlooked elements of being a caregiver.

Caring for yourself might sound selfish when someone is ill and needs your help. But is it really selfish? Not at all. Without *your* good health, your loved one's health can suffer.

If you become ill, you may:

- Infect your loved one
- Make caregiving errors or questionable decisions
- Have to resort to more costly alternatives for care
- Be separated from your loved one if you need to be hospitalized

There is, however, one thing you can do right away to stay healthy. It's quick, easy and effective: *immunize yourself against some of the most preventable infectious diseases.*

Caregivers Are at Risk

Taking care of a loved one can be very rewarding—but can also cause stress, depression and lowered resistance to physical illness. Lack of sleep contributes to caregivers' health problems, too. Studies have shown that:

- Caregivers care for themselves less than non-caregivers do

- Approximately half of all caregivers show clinical signs of depression
- Older caregiving spouses are at higher risk of dying than non-caregivers of the same age
- Younger "baby boomers"—those dealing simultaneously with parents, children and career—are also at increased risk for illness

First Things First

Even though you may not be able to cure your loved one's condition, you are careful to ensure he or she gets proper medical and preventive care. But you need to do something for your own health as well. Why start with immunization?

- Up to 40,000 American adults die each year from vaccine-preventable diseases.
- Vaccinations are easy, safe and effective!

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has recommended immunizations for professional healthcare workers since 1981. Immunizations are becoming a standard for health professionals, and they should be for you, too.

The Big Three

With immunization, you have protection against certain diseases. The most important immunizations you should have are against influenza, pneumococcal disease, and tetanus.

- Influenza and pneumonia are the fifth leading cause of death in older adults.
- More than 90% of those who die from flu and pneumonia are people 65 years of age and older.
- Tetanus, although rare, tends more often to be fatal for older adults.

What is Influenza?

Influenza – sometimes called the "flu" – is a contagious virus infection. Symptoms are: sore throat, runny nose, cough, fever, headache and muscle aches.

- Influenza often leads to pneumonia or complications in older people.
- More than 200,000 are hospitalized and 36,000 die from influenza annually in the U.S.
- 90% of influenza-related deaths are in persons age 65 and over.

Influenza Vaccine Facts

- Flu shots reduce hospitalization and death for older adults.
- You can get a flu shot and other immunizations at the same time.
- Get a flu shot if you're 50 or older or if you live with or regularly care for a person 65 years or older, or someone who is chronically ill.
- Influenza vaccines are constantly updated, so you need a flu shot every year—the best time is in the fall (October-November), but you can get vaccinated through February.
- If you are under 50 years of age, in good health and not pregnant, you can choose to receive the nasal spray flu vaccine instead of the injection.

What is pneumococcal disease?

Pneumococcal disease is a bacterial infection which invades the lungs and causes pneumonia. It can also go on to infect the bloodstream and cause bacteremia, or it can even go to the covering of the brain, causing meningitis.

Pneumonia symptoms include high fever, cough with mucus, shaking chills, breathlessness, and chest pain that increases with breathing and coughing.

- About 5,000 Americans die of pneumococcal bacteremia and meningitis each year.
- African-Americans, Native Americans and Alaskan Natives have even higher infection risks.

Pneumococcal Vaccination Facts

- Except for high-risk people who may need a booster shot, one immunization covers you for life.
- If you are 65 years of age or older, you need a vaccination.
- Can't remember ever getting vaccinated for this? Get vaccinated and keep a record.
- You can get vaccinated at any time during the year.
- Pneumococcal infections are becoming increasingly resistant to antibiotics – so prevention through immunization is extremely important.

What is Tetanus?

Tetanus, or "lockjaw," is caused by a bacterial poison that affects your nervous system. You get it through a cut or wound that is contaminated with tetanus bacteria. These bacteria are commonly found in soil, dust and manure.

Tetanus symptoms are severe muscle spasms, "locking" of the jaw so you cannot open your mouth or swallow, and possible death by suffocation. Tetanus is not spread from person to person.

- About 75% of tetanus cases occur in adults over 60 years of age.
- About 11% of these cases are fatal.
- Because of immunization programs, tetanus is now rare in the U.S.

Tetanus Vaccination Facts

- Tetanus vaccine is combined with diphtheria toxoid and referred to as “Td” so it protects against both tetanus and diphtheria.
- Get a Td booster shot every 10 years.

Where Can You Get Immunized?

You can get these vaccines from your family doctor. In addition, your community health department or hospital may hold special clinics to offer influenza, pneumococcal and other vaccinations. Sometimes senior centers and pharmacies offer them, and during influenza season, you may even see clinics set up in shopping malls, grocery stores and other places. Costs may be covered by Medicare Part B, Medicaid or your private health insurance or HMO.

Make Room for Yourself

Caregiving can be an emotional roller coaster. You need to think about meeting your own needs while continuing to take care of someone else's.

Your sense of responsibility, of doing the right thing, of “giving back” to someone who once took care of you, can only come about if you remain healthy. So take special care of yourself. There are a number of ways to improve and maintain your health. Seek out caregiver support services in your community. Join a support group—in-person or online. Take breaks from caregiving. Get rest, get exercise, get others to help. But before you do that, be wise... and IMMUNIZE!

Where Can You Learn More?

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
www.cdc.gov
(800) CDC-INFO
(800) 232-6348

National Foundation for Infectious Diseases (NFID)
www.nfid.org
(301) 656-0003

Resources for Caregivers

Eldercare Locator

The Eldercare Locator, a public service of the U.S. Administration on Aging, connects older Americans and their caregivers with sources of information on senior services. The service links those who need assistance with state and local area agencies on aging and community-based organizations that serve older adults and their caregivers.

www.eldercare.gov
(800) 677-1116

Family Caregiver Alliance

Family Caregiver Alliance supports and sustains the important work of families and friends caring for loved ones with chronic, disabling health conditions. Through its National Center on Caregiving, FCA offers information and assistance in locating community resources and services nationwide.

www.caregiver.org
(800) 445-8106 or
info@caregiver.org

Information provided in this fact sheet was developed by the National Center on Caregiving at Family Caregiver Alliance, San Francisco, CA. For more information on FCA programs and services, visit www.caregiver.org.

FOR MORE

AoA recognizes the importance of making information readily available to consumers, professionals, researchers, and students. Our website provides information for and about older persons, their families, and professionals involved in aging programs and services. For more information about AoA, please contact: US Dept of Health and Human Services, Administration on Aging, Washington, DC 20201; phone: (202) 619-0724; fax (202) 357-3523; Email: aoainfo@aoa.gov; or contact our website at: www.aoa.gov